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Church, Frank
SOC 4.01.2 Three Days
of the Condor

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MARIANNE MEANS

Investigating The CIA

Sen. Frank Church, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, saw the brutal spy movie "Three Days Of The Condor" recently and says "I've been looking over my shoulder ever since." He is only half joking.

The committee's report exposing several CIA plots to assassinate foreign leaders will be presented to the Senate in a secret session today. The Senate is expected to approve making the report public, although President Ford and the Justice Department have pleaded that it remain secret.

Church says he has been "personally shocked" by the committee's discovery of plots to kill foreign officials, secretly open citizens' mail, discredit unpopular figures, and pull various other unsavory and illegal stunts. He feels satisfied that the assassination report — and the final committee report, to follow in January when hearings are finished — will reveal more about the CIA and its clandestine world than the public ever suspected might exist.

But he concedes "there are many holes in the evidence, many unanswered questions." He adds, "We couldn't make findings where the evidence is contradictory or insufficient." One such area is the question of whether President John Kennedy's assassination was somehow triggered by the fact that the CIA had unsuccessfully plotted to kill Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. The committee's evidence reportedly does not disprove that theory but it does not prove anything, either. (Another Senate committee is currently investigating the Warren Commission's handling of the Kennedy assassination and allegedly has turned up new evidence of a Cuban connection.)

Church also acknowledges that his committee was unable to establish whether any given illegal activity was specifically approved by a president. "It's hard to know," he says, thoughtfully, rubbing his forehead

with his hand. He points out that many of the key participants involved are now dead. "It could have been done verbally," he adds.

It has been a tough assignment. Church does not believe, as presidential candidate Fred Harris does, that the CIA should be abolished altogether. He has tried to expose the unlawful conduct while preserving such secrets as necessary to protect the proper international information-gathering apparatus. For his pains, he has been denounced both as a headline-hunter and as too soft on the CIA. The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between those two extremes.

Church has done a responsible job; neither he nor any other committee member has succumbed to the temptation to exaggerate or sensationalize the findings. In fact, the committee has operated so low-key that there has been hardly any public reaction to the six months of hearings.

Church is somewhat puzzled by the lack of public outrage. He is also a bit disappointed, since he had counted on the attention given to the probe to provide him with a foundation for a presidential campaign. "Maybe the public is simply shock-proof now," he muses. "They have been scandalized by so much for so long."

Nonetheless, Church is still flirting with the presidency. He will make no move until the committee finishes its work. That means he must skip the early primaries and those with early filing deadlines. New Hampshire is definitely out.

"A late entry would not be feasible," he says, "if any of the announced contenders, who have had months to organize, catches fire in the early primaries." But if he thinks he has a chance, he will run. "No one can spend 20 years in politics as I have and not find that office (the White House) a very enticing one," he adds with a broad smile.